Cultural Resources Management in Mexico

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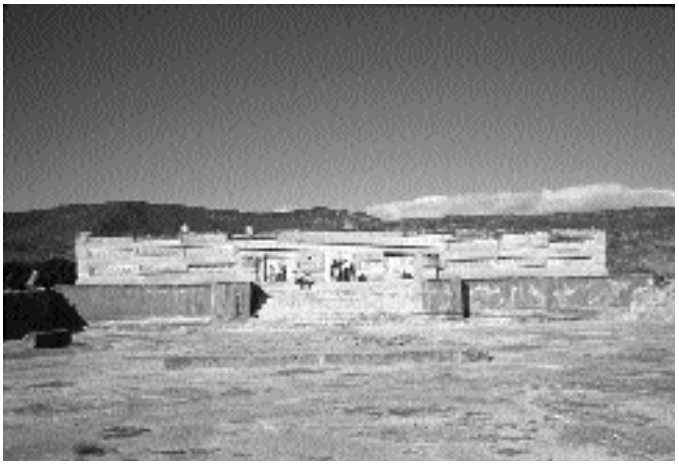
Although over the past two decades the concept of cultural resources management has come into widespread use in the United States, it is almost unknown among Mexican archeologists and preservationists. This is not due to a fundamental difference in roles; many of their responsibilities, e.g., research, protection, or interpretation, are comparable to those of their counterparts in the United States. There are, however, significant differences in context, institutions, and operational processes. These differences, in turn, alter the organizational and societal landscapes of professional practice and make more problematic the transferability of CRM as it exists in the United States.



Hall of the Columns, Mitla, Oaxaca. This is the finest and most complete structure remaining at the site.

Context

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of CRM as practiced in Mexico is the exceptional complexity of the country's cultural patrimony. A few examples:

The indigenous population, both past and present. The most visible legacy of the pre-conquest population is the extraordinary array of monumental archeological sites associated with the Aztecs, Maya, Zapotecs, and other Mesoamerican cultural groups. Today several million people still speak indigenous languages and maintain some continuity with traditional culture.

The colonial past. After the Spanish conquest Mexico experienced nearly three centuries of colonial rule, leaving a notable imprint in the form of architecture, religion, fine arts, and language. Sometimes this imprint reflected a process of gradual diffusion, but in many cases it was a consequence of deliberate imposition by the dominant society.

The emergence of mestizo society. Unlike the United States, where immigrants from Europe largely displaced and marginalized the indigenous population, the mixing of ethnicities in Mexico produced a distinctive society, particularly in terms of nonmaterial culture. In turn, this has been modified through penetration by external influences.

Regional variations. While to outside observers Mexico may appear to be a homogeneous country, in reality there is substantial regional diversity. Southern states such as Chiapas and Oaxaca are home to large indigenous populations; the food, music, and Spanish of Veracruz is quite different from that of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands; and most of the monumental pre-Hispanic architecture is found south and east of Mexico City.

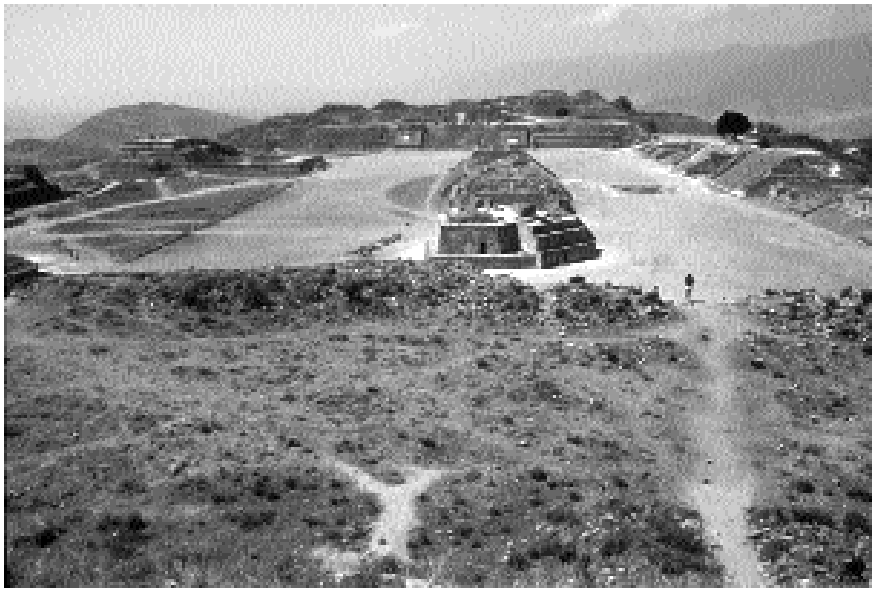
Land tenure. At least five different land tenure systems exist, each of which confers different rights and/or constraints. In addition to private and government property, lands may be held communally, to be managed by a public committee for the common good; as *ejido* land managed by *ejido* members for their benefit under the agrarian reform laws passed after the Mexican Revolution; and occasionally church lands, which although outlawed more than 130 years ago are still granted recognition in some communities. Frequently land title is unclear and the same plot of land may be subject to more than one tenure system.

In Mexico, then, the practice of CRM exists in an environment of overlapping mosaics. Furthermore these mosaics are dynamic, not static; people migrate, technology and economic development alter land use, and new forms of communication lead to changes in language and cultural expression. Remarkable cultural resilience and substantial pressures for change further complicate cultural resource management and policy.

La Fortaleza, Mitla, Oaxaca. Unexcavated stone and adobe fortress overlooking the principal site.

In a sense, efforts to manage cultural resources pre-date the Spanish conquest. There is ample evidence from Teotihuacan, Chichen-Itza, Mitla, and other sites of repair, expansion, and adaptation of sacred public spaces across time. The few surviving documents from the pre-Hispanic period, i.e., the codices, and the remaining wall murals clearly refer to people, history, legends, and myths as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. During the colonial period the management of cultural resources implied a dual process of exploitation of indigenous cultures by stripping the population of its valuables for export to Spain while repressing or displacing many cultural forms in favor of their European counterparts.

Native people sought to protect core beliefs and practices by merging them with or hiding them within the dominant culture. This provided some historical continuity but also transformed elements of both indigenous and Spanish colonial culture, contributing to the mosaic effect alluded to previously.



The central plaza at Monte Alban, Oaxaca. Monte Alban is the largest and best known of several thousand sites in the state.

More formal efforts to manage cultural resources appeared early in the 19th century. One of the first pieces of legislation passed after Mexican independence was a law forbidding export of "antiquities." At intervals there followed additional laws and executive orders governing property rights, excavation permits, federal oversight of archeology, and other matters related to CRM. On a number of occasions the federal government affirmed its control over all archeological sites and activity in the country, largely as a response to looting, vandalism, and foreign archeologists' export of data and materials (Lorenzo 1984: 90-92). By the early-20th century national government interest in cultural resources extended beyond regulation to direct participation in archeological excavation and site restoration. Although written during the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, Article 73 of the 1917 Constitution granted Congress the specific authority "…to enact laws concerning the archeological, artistic, and historical monuments whose conservation is in the public interest" (Lorenzo 1984: 90).

Institutions

For more than a century after independence there was little institutional development or continuity in cultural resources management. At various times responsible agencies included the Museo Nacional Mexicano (Mexican National Museum, 1831), the Museo Publico de Historia Natural, Arqueologia e Historia (Public Museum of Natural History, Archeology, and History, 1865), the Inspeccion General de Monumentos (Inspector General of Monuments, 1885), and others (Olive Negrete and Castro-Pozo 1988: 9-14). Sometimes these agencies were autonomous, while at others they were but part of a broader, Cabinet-level department. The instability and frequent reorganizations after the Revolution meant, the new Mexican Constitution notwithstanding, limited opportunity to institutionalize archeological research and protection.

It was not until 1939 that President Lazaro Cardenas consolidated several programs and functions in a new federal agency, the Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia (National Institute of Anthropology and History), commonly referred to as INAH. This consolidation paralleled the creation of several other resource management agencies, e.g., in petroleum and electricity, but INAH was assigned to the Department of Education, a reflection of Cardenas' view that INAH's focus would be research and education. He was particularly concerned that INAH contribute to national integration and an appreciation of Mexico's cultural heritage by fostering greater awareness of the contributions and significance of the indigenous population. Today, INAH's mandate in cultural resources management stems from the Ley Federal de Monumentos y Zonas Arqueologicos, Artisticos, e Historicos (Federal Law for Archeological, Artistic, and Historic Monuments and Zones, 1972), as amended. It gives INAH lead responsibility for site registry, protection, and managerial oversight.

INAH differs from its predecessors in several respects. First, while the laws defining INAH's authority and operational responsibilities have been modified several times since 1939, its mission remains essentially unchanged. This provides a sense of continuity and institutionalization of functions. Second, it has a far broader intellectual and disciplinary base than earlier agencies. Among its area of specialization one finds archeology, restoration and preservation, linguistics, social and physical anthropology, and museums. Under the influence of American cultural ecology and European Marxism the research focus has widened in two ways. Particularly in the last generation the concern has shifted from the study and protection of monumental archeological sites themselves to a more complete examination of dwelling areas, infrastructure systems, and trade routes. The integration of archeology and anthropology also means greater attention to settlement patterns, commerce, production, and power relations within and between communities.

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Monte Alban tourist flow taxes the limited facilities and absorptive capacity of the site.

Still a third major change from the past is INAH's assumption of a number of collateral responsibilities, from public education to training most of the cultural resource professionals in Mexico in its own university system. Yet a fourth change is INAH's assumption of the central role in salvage archeology, an important consideration in a country rich in archeological sites and experiencing rapid economic development.

As INAH's responsibilities have broadened its organizational structure has become more complex. Overall policy guidance comes from the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (National Council for Culture and Arts), primarily through its Technical Secretary. Policy implementation also requires consultation with appropriate departments within INAH and other federal agencies. Decisions at a project level are implemented through the responsible units, e.g., a department, research center, or one of INAH's state-level offices, after receiving approval from the Archeology Council. The Council consists of directors of research units, representatives from the state offices, and outside advisors. Its function is to review and approve projects planned by Mexican archeologists or by foreign institutions. Without such approval no archeological project may go forward; thus, the Council wields enormous influence over Mexican archeology.

INAH departments most involved in cultural resources management include:

Archeology. This department serves as the link and coordinator between senior INAH policy-makers and the Archeology Council on the one hand, and practicing archeologists on the other. It oversees both archeological research and restoration projects, particularly as these relate to other INAH departments or INAH's state offices.

Archeological Registry, Monuments, and Archeological Zones. This is the entity charged with the responsibility for background and evaluation studies permitting official declaration of federal protection for archeological sites. Such studies include assessment of not only the site itself but also adjacent homes, infrastructure, and other aspects of the overall setting. It defines the criteria to be applied in delimiting zones deemed to be in danger of destruction or damage. It also drafts executive orders establishing archeological zones or monuments and historic sites.

Salvage Archeology. This department plans and executes salvage archeology through agreements with other federal agencies, state governments, public corporations, and private enterprise. Most of its activity has to do with public works projects such as dams, pipelines, highways, and the Mexico City Metro or subway.

Underwater Archeology. Responsible for protection and research on archeological sites and materials at inland and marine locations, this department is still in its infancy. Given the apparent absence of a sea-going tradition in pre-Hispanic Mexico, most of its work involves materials recovery from the cenotes in the Yucatan.

Cultural Property Restoration. This department handles the restoration work necessary for INAH properties. Much of its responsibility involves providing technical assistance to other departments in INAH.

Museums and Exhibits. This department handles the planning, organization, and preparation of museums and traveling exhibits which draw on INAH's collections. The department serves both an educational and a custodial function, and provides national, state, site, and agency museums with technical assistance and exhibit support.

At the state level INAH will have a center to administer sites and projects, conduct research, and carry out national policy. State centers vary in size and staffing. Some, such as Yucatan or Oaxaca, employ several hundred people due to substantial research, preservation, or other activity. Other states have modest offices and depend more heavily on specialists dispatched from Mexico City. To some degree state centers receive basic funding from INAH, but research and project budgets depend in large part on the ability of center managers and researchers to generate projects which win the endorsement of the Archeology Council.

Note that the above pertains most directly to archeology; linguistics or physical anthropology have somewhat different organizational arrangements, although they also will be represented in the state centers. Note also that these arrangements call for considerable consultation and coordination if they are to be effective, and in practice even the largest centers depend heavily on INAH's central administration for approval and oversight. Some archeologists with projects strongly supported in Mexico City function largely autonomously, with little state office supervision.

Challenges

- Mexico's administrative system is concentrated in Mexico City, and despite the dispersal of INAH employees across the country, special projects, and state centers, INAH is no exception to that pattern. To the extent this

centralization affects INAH's decision-making it means that operational decisions at the field level must be referred back to Mexico City for review and approval. Given the complexity of the country's cultural patrimony, central decision makers may be ill-prepared to understand the nuances of difficult local matters. Indeed, their preferred solutions and operational practices may be at variance with those best suited for local conditions.

- Mexico has received substantial international recognition for its research, training, and preservation efforts; indeed Mexico frequently serves as a model for other Latin American countries. INAH aggressively seeks UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for key sites as a means of underscoring such recognition, as a competitive factor in seeking international funding, and as a selling point for international tourism. It means, however, that INAH must be responsive to the standards and priorities of UNESCO, and this sometimes leads to internal conflict between those who attach importance to UNESCO standards and to those who give greater weight to local criteria.
- Since the 19th century the federal government has maintained a tight control over archeological practice and permits. Mexico, for example, has neither contract archeologists nor state preservation officers. While this means Mexican cultural resource managers spend less time than their American counterparts coordinating activities of many different agencies and actors, it also means that all of the research and other activity which gets farmed out in the fragmented American system must pass through the hands of a limited number of archeologists or cultural resource managers. As budgetary constraints make it difficult to add staff and centralization of authority channels decisionmaking upward in the organization, INAH finds itself pressed to respond to needs in a timely fashion.
- The processes of urbanization, industrialization, and economic development generate significant pressures on cultural resources. Urbanization creates demands for modification or replacement of old building stock, even when this may have historical value or be protected by law. The expansion of human settlements in areas adjacent to archeological sites means a continuing problem with land invasions and conversion to other use, as in the effects of the city of Oaxaca's suburban sprawl on Monte Alban. Infrastructure construction, while necessary to meet other national needs, threatens known and unidentified sites. And the decision to emphasize tourism as a means of promoting national economic development means increasing visitor traffic without the planning or investment necessary to manage it effectively.
- To the extent CRM exists in practice in Mexico it does so informally and within an institutional framework designed for other purposes. INAH's internal complexity and multiple roles complicate the policy and administrative integration which facilitate CRM; cultural resource managers find it difficult to mobilize the authority and expertise necessary for prompt problem-solving. Architects, archeologists, and anthropologists tend to coexist uneasily rather than work readily as teams, and managerial performance depends more on individual charisma than trained capacity.

Watch for our next article in a future issue of *CRM* which will provide a specific illustration of the ways in which these challenges interact with cultural complexity as INAH seeks to address CRM dilemmas.

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Photos by the authors.

For additional reading, see *CRM* Vol. 17, No. 3.
